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ABSTRACT

One of a series of nine articles which review recent educational literature and offer hints to teachers, this paper examines children as potential adults. They bring to school with them all the diversity and advantages or disadvantages of their homes, families, and environments. From all these influences each child has developed a picture of himself, a self-image. We do not know exactly how a self-image is created, but we can and must try to help each child see himself more clearly. Classroom teachers can help children look at themselves carefully in a mirror, to see their outside features which show prominently to the world. Photographs of individual children provide permanent proof of how they look and give confidence to awakening self-images of disadvantaged children. The importance of being an individual can easily be reinforced in the classroom by the recognition of the child's birthday. These are some starting points for working with each child on his self-image; every child has needs to be met in these basic areas. Enlarging and clarifying self-image is a lifelong process, but boosts toward self-identification and self-importance given during the early school years promote success in school. (Author/NM)

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FIRST, THEY ARE CHILDREN

Tomorrow's citizens, wage earners, and parents are among us now. Each fall a new wave of our future enters school and our teachers are faced with the ever-renewed problem of training tomorrow's adults. This wave of our future is composed of children. Children of every size, shape, color, and kind; but still, first of all, they are children.

These children bring to school with them all the advantages or disadvantages, all the privileges or lack or privileges, all the enthusiasms or discouragements, all the intellectual stimulation or intellectual deprivation of their homes, their families and their environment. From all these influences each child has developed a picture of himself; i.e., his self-image.

"Every child develops a picture of himself based on his interaction with family, peers, and environment. In the case of the disadvantaged child, this picture is often distorted by the absence of a mother or father figure and society's apparent rejection of him through the device of discrimination. In addition, the limited job opportunities available to minority group adults sharply limits the adult roles the

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child is able to see and emulate."[1]

"Family environment and language handicaps can take years and years of patience and struggle to deal with, but improving self-image of disadvantaged children cannot wait."[2]

Exactly what sequence of influences affect a child to develop the self-image which he sees of himself cannot be completely known nor understood, but we do know that we can and must try to help each child to see himself more clearly. Seeing himself clearly may be as simple as providing the opportunity for each child to take a long, close, critical look at himself, his body on the outside and his abilities on the inside. Since it is quicker and easier to see the outside features which show prominently to the world, a child can look closely at himself, eye to eye, in a mirror for almost immediate response to the eternal question of "Who am I?" Each classroom teacher can help each child look at himself carefully in a mirror. Some disadvantaged children have no mirror at home in which to look critically at himself and compare with others.

Therefore, the disadvantaged child without a mirror to use at home has not had a chance to form a real picture of himself and how he measures-up in bodily looks as compared to others of his own peer group. He has only a weak notion of family resemblances, if he has never seen those resemblances. He has

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[1]Hopkins, Lee Bennett. Let Them Be Themselves, Scholastic Book Services, Pg. 20.

[2]ibid, pg. 20.

never been able to accept the fact that all people are different, but all people are much alike, if he has never had a chance to see himself in a mirror as an individual or as a member of a group.

The reflection of oneself in a mirror is fleeting, but the image imprinted on paper by a camera is permanent. For the disadvantaged child who is unsure of himself and his self-image, a photograph can give him permanent proof of how he looks as he is alone in repose or working and playing with others. The reassurance of being able to check daily and weekly on "how I look", "here I am", and "what I am doing" give permanence and confidence to the awakening self-image of a disadvantaged child.

The recognition of a permanent identification leads to the recognition of a sense of self-importance. The importance of being an individual, separate and distinct from every other individual can easily be reinforced in the classroom by the recognition of the child's birthday. The emphasis of "my birthday" cannot fail to bring home to a child that his arrival in the world was of importance to himself, his family, his siblings, and now to his peers and his teacher. So whether it be a birthday choice of story or game, a birthday gift from the class, a musical birthday wish, the feeling of self-importance in the recognition of a child's birthday brings about an

enlargement and clarity to the child's self-image.

This enlarging and clarifying of the child's self-image is an on-going process continuing throughout all his life. But the boosts toward self-identification and self-importance given during the early school years are the boosts toward the possibility of success or failure in school. The child who has a hazy, unfocused, underdeveloped picture of himself will be foggy, unsure, and unenthusiastic about the world around him and particularly about his schoolwork. Hence, he is doomed to failure. In contrast to this, the child who has been able to develop a self-image which is clear, in focus, and meaningful can move ahead surely and enthusiastically in his world of school, peers and parents. He is on the road to success.

In conclusion, our thoughts about the self-image of children, particularly disadvantaged children, bring us to realize that no matter what the background of a child, when he arrives at school, he has brought with him the common denominators of "a name, a birthday, an image, a self!"[3] In these very essential basics every child is alike. Every child has needs to be met in these basic areas and these are the starting points for work with each child on his own self-image. Only after progress is made in improving and building a child's self-image from these starting points do other influences become involved. As teachers branch out from these common basic denominators which belong to every child, then they find

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[3]Ibid., Pg. 35.

children who have come to them from an ancestral background of an Irish family, a Spanish family, a German family, a Negro family, an Indian family, ad infinitum. But first, and most important, they are children.

Written by,
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Suggested Readings

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. Let Them Be Themselves. New York: Scholastic Book Service, 1969.

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